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# AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED TO THE PUPILS OF

## WILMINGTON BOARDING SCHOOL

FOR GIRLS,

THIRD MONTH 24, 1848,

BY WILLIAM DENNIS,

Principal Teacher in that Institution.

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Application being made to the author of the following pages, by a committee of the pupils to whom they were addressed, for a copy to be printed, he promised to comply with their request ; for, although the address was written solely for the use that had already been made of it, yet he indulged the hope, that if each pupil should have a copy to read over at leisure, the object which he had in view in writing it, might be more fully accomplished.

## AN ADDRESS, &c.

You are collected at this time, my young friends, (as you already know,) to hear a short address that I have prepared to read to you; and I think it not unlikely some degree of curiosity may be excited in your minds respecting the nature and purpose of it. Something, I think, might be inferred from the way in which it is brought before you. You have seen no public announcement of an address to be delivered—we have not invited your relatives and friends to come and see how learned or how eloquent your teachers are—you see no studied arrangement to make the occasion an impressive or imposing one. On the contrary, we are collected with (I think I may say) our usual simplicity of procedure, and, if I am not mistaken, you will find the address itself to agree in character with the circumstances under which it is introduced to you. I have not written to amuse, nor even merely to interest you, though more than willing to do either on any suitable occasion; but at present I have a different, though, as I believe, more important object in view; and I shall not be at all surprised if a shade, at least, of disappointment should pass over your minds, when you discover, as you soon will, how serious both my subject and my purpose are. I stand before you at this time in no different relation from that in which I have been with you from day to day—I am here as your teacher, and I feel bound to say that the earnest and heedful attention, with which I have observed you to receive what I have had occasion to communicate on subjects of less importance, has suggested and confirmed the hope, that you would do no less, if I should set before you some matters of infinitely higher interest. My design may be stated in a very few words; I have had more experience of life than you have had, and consequently greater advantages for observation and reflection. By these means, I

have acquired some views of life, different probably from what many of you entertain, but which seem to me correct views; and as I know that, if they are correct, they are of the very highest importance, I wish to present them to you in order that, if they seem to you to be just and true, you may adopt them and act upon them.

What, then, is this life that we are leading? What does it mean? What are we, and whither are we going? It may be, that it has never occurred to some of you to consider such questions as these, but of what awful import are they, and how deeply interesting must the answers to them be! You may ask—Can they, indeed, be answered? I think they can; not, it is true, in such a way as to satisfy idle curiosity; but I am confident, that, with the light that is afforded by revelation, they can be answered so fully as to meet all the serious practical purposes of the honest enquirer. But it is not my intention to enter at present upon the very wide field of thought that is opened to view by these questions, and I have presented them only as introductory to another, closely connected with these, but of still greater practical importance. For it is not what or whence we are, that it most immediately and most urgently concerns us to know, but what our business is here in this life, that is even now passing away. What have we to do? what is our work? and are we getting it done? These are different forms of what may be truly called the one great question of life, compared with which all others, except in so far as they are connected with this, are of little importance. Yet, how little attention does it receive from the great majority, even in this enlightened age and country? Truly and emphatically may it be said, in the language of the New Testament, “They have made light of it, and have gone their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise.” In the common affairs of life it is accounted only ordinary prudence and a rational regard to one’s interest, in the professor of any art, or the occupant of any important station, for him to devote his time and to apply his mind chiefly to his office or calling, in order to understand fully the principles upon which it depends, and to perfect his skill by practice; and does it not, then, show a lack of ordinary prudence

—nay, considering the magnitude of the interest involved, is it not the height of folly—a mad mistake, to be careless and neglectful of this great art of *living as we ought*, to which we are all apprentices, bound by an indenture which death alone can cancel.

When I see such games  
 Played by the creatures of a Power who swears  
 That He will judge the earth, and call the fool  
 To a sharp reckoning who has lived in vain,

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*

I feel my heart

Dissolve in pity.

But neither, again, is it my present purpose to attempt to go over the whole ground, that a full and complete answer to even this one question must necessarily cover. It requires qualifications to which I could make little pretension—it belongs to an office that I have no right to assume, to explain and enforce the principles of the higher branches of this subject, to which the solemn duties and sacred mysteries of religion belong. It is only some elementary instruction that I propose to communicate—it is merely the first step that I would direct; merely the entrance to the right way that I wish to point out to you. But, while I freely admit, that the office I have thus assumed is comparatively humble, I cannot regard it as an unimportant one, or this division of the whole subject as of little consequence. It is plain, that if there be no first step there can be no progress, and if it be in a wrong direction, there is the greatest danger that the subsequent course will be a wandering in error. I am aware, therefore, of the responsibility that attaches to an undertaking like this, and I have entered upon it only in obedience to the doctrines I am about to inculcate.

And here, perhaps, some one may be ready to ask—What need is there of this? Have we not been told about these things again and again? Have we not had line upon line, and precept upon precept, and what occasion then can there be for more? To these objections I might reply, that not every kind of instruction is adapted to each particular case, or to particular circumstances; and I might refer to my own experience as leading me to believe that public com-

munications on subjects of this kind, often suppose in the hearer : greater degree of experience in life, and greater familiarity with the peculiar terms employed than is generally possessed, at least by the young. I might find a further apology for bringing this subject before you, in its unspeakable importance, and in the great danger there is of our too far losing sight of it amid the busy scenes of life, if our attention is not repeatedly called to it. But it will be much more to the purpose, as regards the object I have in view, to appeal on this point to the individual experience and consciousness of each one of you. Are you, in your more serious and thoughtful moments, entirely satisfied that both your motives and your conduct are, even in the main, just what they ought to be ? and, if not, do you see clearly and understand fully wherein they are not what they should be, or how and where you ought to set about making them such ? Now, if any can answer either of these questions in the affirmative—if they can say, unreservedly, that they are so satisfied, or that they do see the better way as clearly as they desire, then, I must acknowledge, that, as regards these, there will be little encouragement for me to speak, as there will be little inducement for them to listen. But is this the case with all ? Would you all so answer ? I feel confident that you will at least excuse me, if I proceed on a supposition quite different from this. Not that I, by any means, suppose you very often, or very severely condemn yourselves ; we are but too prone to attribute our vexations and disappointments, and that inward sense of dissatisfaction that will at times come over us like a cloud, to some other cause than any deficiency on our part, or any mistake in our own plan and course of life. If you were to reason with yourselves on your manner of life, would not your reflections, if expressed in words, be much like these ? “ I think I do pretty well ; I obey my parents ; I am not guilty of dishonesty, falsehood, or meanness ; I try to observe, for the most part, what is generally considered correct conduct ; and I believe I do about as well as others, and, as well as could be expected, in the circumstances in which I am placed. It is true I do sometimes have misgivings about my course of life, and occasionally feel very much dissatisfied with myself, but I think that this is gene-



s not our own but God's world. We further believe, I trust, that by the great Creator of the world, we also were created and placed in it; and that in placing us here, He has some *design*—that it is for the accomplishment of some purpose concerning us. It must then be plain to the very commonest understanding, that we are bound, by His right—by our own dependence—by gratitude—by every consideration that the relation between us and Him—to whom we owe everything, can suggest, to make His design, whatever it may be, our design—to make His purpose our purpose—to endeavour, with sincerity and earnestness, to co-operate with Him in His plan. Nor can we doubt, having confidence in His justice and benevolence, that such a course will be altogether conducive to our own highest interests. So far all is plain; and I suppose that hardly would any candid mind hesitate, on the least reflection, to assent to these simple, but all important truths. But when we proceed a step further, and enquire what this plan and purpose concerning us are, and what our part in them is, we reach that point at which there is the greatest danger of stumbling, and at which very many, even thoughtful minds, either halt in perpetual doubt and hesitation, or turn aside into some of the numerous paths of error. It is to this point, therefore, in this enquiry that I would most especially call your attention. Now it has long been agreed, among the wisest and best of mankind, and it accords with both the deductions of reason and the teachings of revelation, that a part, at least, of this divine purpose, and, as it were, the beginning and foundation of all the rest, is the establishment in us of virtuous *habits* of thought, feeling and action, and the progressive improvement and advance towards perfection, of our moral nature: and further, that the position and circumstances in which we are placed in this life, not only are, but are *designed* to be, the *means* by which these habits are to be formed and this advancement effected, as well as the trial or proof of the progress that we have made. To direct us in the use of these appointed means—that is, to guide us in every case that may arise, we are furnished with His revealed will in the New Testament, which teaches us what affections we ought to cultivate and to exercise, and by what motives to action we ought to be influenced—we are endowed with reason

by which we judge of the causes and consequences of actions ; and with conscience, which pronounces an immediate decision upon our motives and affections, showing us at once whether they conform to what we have been taught by reason and revelation to believe to be right ;—while to the humble and faithful, direct spiritual aid and guidance are promised. The performance of any individual act, or the exercise of any particular affection, which these guiding principles may lead or prompt us to, we call a *duty* ; that is, it is something that is *due* from us to our Creator, because He requires it of us : or, we say it is what we *ought* to do—that is, it is something that we *owe* to Him from whom we have received all. The conclusion then is plain, that the part which it belongs to us to perform, in the accomplishment of the divine purpose, is the discharge of our duties. Here therefore we obtain a clear answer to the question that was proposed ; and with the fullest confidence I offer it to you, as an incontrovertible truth, that the prompt, conscientious discharge of every daily—every hourly duty as it arises, should be the *chief* aim and purpose—the *main* business—the one grand object of our lives. And I commend this course, not as that which will afford the most happiness—not as that which will give the greatest satisfaction—not as that which will contribute most to our interest ; though I assuredly believe it will do all this ; but I commend it to the sincere and thoughtful mind, as that which is right—as that which is appointed for us by the God of all. For this course of duty by no means consists in the performance of certain acts, as something that must be done, or as something that it will be for our interest to do, but in the discharge of every office that we perceive to be a duty, whether it be to do or to suffer—to exercise some affection or to restrain a propensity ; and that, not as something necessary or expedient, but as an act of obedience to Him to whom we feel that we owe entire submission. And it is of especial consequence to observe, that this reasoning as truly applies to the very smallest, as to the most important duties of life. If there is any one great error, in relation to this subject, to which we are more liable than to any other, it is, I think, that of regarding ordinary, everyday duties as unimportant or mere accidental matters, that do not deserve our serious



thought or attention as duties. The evil resulting from this error is often twofold—a neglect of these duties and the misapplication of the time and energy that belonged to these, to something not quite within our proper sphere of action, as for example, to some popular or plausible scheme of reform. If again, our situation is not such as we would prefer, but such as we have found necessary or expedient, we are too apt to regard its duties as something to be got through with, in any way the shortest possible, while we are looking to something elsewhere, or to something future, which we hope to attain, and which we think will be more to our taste, and contribute more to our enjoyment. But if we believe, that He who *made* the world *governs* it also according to such laws as He has himself established, every circumstance or concurrence of circumstances, which renders the performance of any act or the exercise of an affection a duty, must be regarded as being designed or permitted by Him for our trial and improvement. How often is it thoughtlessly said—I know I ought to do this, or that, but indeed I can't; and for a reason why it cannot be done, reference is made to some trifling circumstance, or to some wish or inclination with which it would interfere. But do those, who thus trifle with their consciences, consider what they admit when they say—I know I ought to do this thing? Do they consider, that they in effect admit, that He, by whose will they exist, and by the dispensations of whose Providence they have been placed in the situation and circumstances that render this a duty, has as truly and as certainly appointed that thing for them to do, as if a voice from heaven had spoken aloud in their ears. And this is true, let me repeat, however unimportant the thing itself may appear to us: every duty, we should remember, is something due from us to Him to whom we are accountable—it is some portion of the part assigned to us in the accomplishment of the Divine purposes; and whatever we believe we ought to do, that to us is a duty, whether it be an act of devotion, the proper regulation of our feelings and conduct towards those with whom we are in any way connected, or the performance of any single office or task of the day.

Here I must distinctly remark, in accordance with what I have already said, that I do not offer this as a full statement of all the

relations existing between us and our Creator : there are other higher and more mysterious doctrines set forth in the sacred volume. What I proposed was, to give an account of what seemed to me to be the right beginning—the true entrance to the more perfect way. As such I offer it with confidence; and although it was my intention, simply to place these views before you, and submit them to your own reflections, yet I cannot well refrain from directing your attention to their perfect agreement, (as I believe it to be,) with what we are taught by revelation. I am persuaded that in the *ordinary* dispensations of Providence, there is no short or royal way to an availing knowledge of the higher doctrines of religion. The one indispensable condition of being made ruler or master of much, is faithfulness in the little. “He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him,” is the language of inspiration; and our Saviour himself distinctly declares—“If any man will *do His will*,” (that is the Father’s,) “he shall *know* of the *doctrine*.” Obedience, therefore, is both the condition and the means of advancement. Discharge faithfully and with right motive the duties of to-day, and those of to-morrow will become ever clearer and higher.\*

Now I know not how many of you have been able to follow me, and to understand all that I have said—some I hope have been able, and I hope that all of you will, at least, be able to see what it is that I recommend. I would have you to ask yourselves, from day to-day, not—what *can* I enjoy, and then—what *must* I do; but reversing the order, to ask first of all—what *ought* I to do, and then, that being provided for,—what *may* I enjoy. The difference may seem to you small, but you may be assured that, in effect, it will, in time, be found to be very great. It very often happens, it is true, (and such may be the case with some of you,) that in early life—when we are living at home with our parents, and no perplexing cares annoy us—when a lack of the comforts of life or of the means of procuring them is neither felt nor feared—the path of duty and the path of pleasure or inclination seem, as it were, to take the same direction, and they so nearly coincide that

\* Carlyle.

we fail to distinguish between them. But as we advance in life, they begin to diverge, and the course of events and that change of circumstances that time must produce soon separate them so widely that we cannot mistake the one for the other, and a choice must be made. If we then find that we have been following the wrong path, how great is the difficulty, and how many tears does it often cost, to get into the right one! Nor let any one think that what I propose will be a hard yoke or a heavy burden; if you adopt this course with the motives that I have recommended, you will find less and less need of any other enjoyment than that indescribable satisfaction which arises from a full discharge of every duty; upon that you will become accustomed to depend, and upon that you *may* depend. Thus the right way will become the easiest way—duty will become a habit, and a habit of duty is virtue.

Now although these things are not only true, but, as it seems to me, plain, yet I know full well how difficult it is, amid the cares and concerns of daily life, to keep the reality—the momentous reality of them before the mind; and when I consider what effect is likely to be produced by this expostulation, (if I may so call it,) high as my estimate is of your disposition and character—and it is very high—I cannot say that my hopes are sanguine.

I know the warning song is sung in vain;  
That few will hear, and fewer heed the strain.

The single consideration, that every act, word, and thought is open to the observation of a just and omnipotent Creator, would seem, in the view of reason, to be sufficient of itself, to induce any one believing in its truth, to live an upright and a pious life. But how little hold does it seem to have upon the great body of mankind. Hence the necessity for that voice, whose peculiar praise it is, still and small though it be,

That whom it teaches it makes prompt to learn.

You, who are in youth, just setting out on the journey of life, are particularly exposed to temptations and the allurements of pleasure; life now promises you many enjoyments, and presents many exciting prospects; you stand, as it were, upon the edge of what seems a broad plain covered with verdure, containing many charming spots, abounding in fair fruits, and adorned with

flowers of every hue. Across this plain, in the distance before you, appears the Mansion of earthly peace and happiness, reposing in its own quiet loveliness. You are eager to set out, by the most direct course, through what promises so delightful a journey to so desirable an abode. But first observe, I entreat you, the progress of those who have already commenced the journey by this *direct* route; do you not perceive them to meet with numerous and unexpected difficulties and disappointments—here a ditch must be struggled through—there a wall seems to rise, as if by magic, before them, while dangerous pits beset their path on the right hand and on the left; those fruits, though often sweet to the taste, prove unwholesome, and even the flowers that seemed so fair, not only wither in the grasp as soon as gathered, but are found to conceal many an ugly thorn. Now, by what seems to you to be more a circuitous route and among brown and uninviting hills, aside from this fair plain, there lies a retired and quiet path that passes by this mansion you so much desire to reach; it is called the path of *dutiful duty*; it presents no gay and brilliant attractions, but it offers to the honest and diligent traveler a firm and safe road, along which he may enjoy many a cool shade, and taste of many a refreshing spring; but, above all, if you will observe attentively, you may see, that the pointer which directs you to this path is inscribed in the handwriting of God,\* and that it leads, by a short and sure route, into the highway to Heaven.

\* Heb. vii. 19.